

2013

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Recommended Citation

Pawlicki, Sarah, "Maximilien Robespierre: "The Incorruptible"" (2013). *A with Honors Projects*. 79.
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Maximilien Robespierre: "The Incorruptible."

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History of Western Civilization 102

April 29, 2013

*The above picture is of Maximilien Robespierre as a young man. www.anselm.edu

Maximilien Robespierre, the man responsible for the bloody Reign of Terror in the latter half of the French Revolution, is a fascinating historical enigma, as the perspectives offered by various historians and contemporaries are largely contradictory. It is not at all clear who this man really was, and thus it is not clear what motivated him to become the master of the guillotine. When one studies Robespierre's early years, he appears to be an intelligent, moral, gifted man, capable of deep feelings—the kind of historical figure it is easy to admire. How did this young man transform into the neurotic who condemned thousands of innocents to death, feeling only bloodshed could preserve his nation? If one looks carefully, clues to this transformation can be found in Robespierre's early life, as his personality, habits, and interests later formed the man who was known to be coldhearted and cruel.

Maximilien Robespierre was the eldest of four children; his siblings were Charlotte, Henriette, and Augustin.¹ His parents, Francois de Robespierre and Jacqueline Carraut, were unmarried when Jacqueline became pregnant with Maximilien; they married five months prior to his birth.² This brush with illegitimacy shaped Robespierre's character, and, as is clear from later events in his life, was a subject he thought about a great deal.³ Francois's family, the de Robespierre's, strongly disapproved of the couple.⁴ While the de Robespierre's weren't actually noble, they did lay claim to the prefix of French nobility, "de," and they had a respectable familial history.⁵ The family profession of lawyer had boosted the family's prestige considerably, and no de Robespierre was thrilled about seeing Francois marry Jacqueline, considering that the Carraut family trade was brewing beer.⁶ However, Francois and Jacqueline were married January 2, 1758.⁷ Francois took his father's profession, becoming a lawyer in Arras, France.⁸ Robespierre was born May 6, 1748.⁹ Throughout the course of their rather brief marriage, Jacqueline bore four more children, but died in childbirth during her fifth pregnancy, on July 16, 1764.¹⁰ This tragedy, occurring when Maximilien was six years old, threw Francois de Robespierre into an emotional tailspin.¹¹ He became increasingly estranged from his very young family, leaving at first for short periods, and then for longer and longer periods of time.¹² Francois de Robespierre left his family

for good two years after his wife's death, reappearing occasionally to borrow money from his mother and sister.¹³ Essentially orphaned at the age of eight, Maximilien went with his brother, Augustin, to live with his maternal grandparents and aunts.¹⁴ His two sisters went to live with their paternal aunts.¹⁵ The children, albeit separated, still saw each other fairly frequently and grew up as a close familial unit.¹⁶

The sadness of Robespierre's early childhood had a strong effect on his personality as a boy. According to his sister Charlotte, the death of his mother particularly devastated him.¹⁷ In her own words, "One cannot get an idea [of the] impression our parents' deaths had on Maximilien."¹⁸ (Charlotte assumed her father died soon after he abandoned his children the final time.¹⁹ However, Francois de Robespierre's death date appears to be unrecorded.²⁰) Of course, his father's abandonment had its impact as well. Some psychology-inclined historians have speculated that his father's desertion was the primary reason Robespierre grew up to be so sensitive to perceived treason and betrayal.²¹ Charlotte said their parents' deaths served to mellow Robespierre, transforming him from a lively, rambunctious, relatively average young boy to a quiet, articulate, thoughtful, diligent child.²² As she describes his transformation, it seems he may have withdrawn from social life at an early age and become coldly logical and detached.²³ However, despite her description of her elder brother's alteration, Charlotte passionately argues nothing could be further from the truth. According to her, Robespierre was not so scarred by early tragedy he was incapable of human emotion. Her brother "loved us tenderly."²⁴

This thoughtful, gentle boy was taught to read by his aunts, and then proceeded to teach himself to write.²⁵ In light of this determined focus on his education, Robespierre was sent, at the age of eight, to the Collège d' Arras.²⁶ Robespierre excelled in his studies, not so much because of natural precocity, but due to his intense focus on his studies and his capacity for hard work and concentration.²⁷ At the age of eleven, Robespierre was granted a scholarship to the College of Louis-le-Grand.²⁸ This scholarship was given by the Abbot of Saint-Vaast.²⁹ Robespierre thrived at the College of Louis-le-Grand.

Again, he surpassed expectations in terms of his studies, and he seemingly had little or no difficulty adapting to the harsh disciplinary policies of the school.³⁰ During his time there, he won six awards for especially excellent translations of works in Latin and Greek.³¹ His excellence in this field was the reason he was given the honor of reciting an official greeting in Latin to King Louis XVI and the king's wife, Queen Marie Antoinette, when they visited the College of Louis-le-Grand after their coronation as monarchs.³² He performed well, but the monarchs were seemingly more unhappy with the wet weather than pleased by Robespierre's official good wishes.³³

Charlotte Robespierre, perhaps unconsciously expressing her positive bias towards her brother, unequivocally states her brother was very well-liked in college due to his amiable nature.³⁴ However, this statement was not precisely accurate. Robespierre did make some enemies in college, notably the Abbé Léon-Bonaventure Proyart, a deputy principal and prefect at Robespierre's school.³⁵ Proyart positively loathed Robespierre, saying extraordinarily unflattering things about Robespierre's policies and character after the Reign of Terror.³⁶ However, as we see some of Robespierre's perceived negative attributes implicitly hinted at in Charlotte's words, such as over-seriousness and taciturnity, we can see some grudgingly acknowledged positive characteristics in the frustrated words of Proyart. "He thought of nothing but his studies, he neglected everything for his studies, his studies were his God... He said little, spoke only when people seemed disposed to listen to him, and always in a decisive and confident tone. Although desperate and insatiable for praise, when it was given, he received it with an air of cold modesty."³⁷ Here, we can see characteristics Charlotte mentioned: hardworking single-mindedness, articulateness, and a quiet, shy disposition. However, we can also see he at least appeared to be cold and externally arrogant, but perhaps suffering from internal low self-esteem. Already, Robespierre was confronting life with the same single-minded intensity he would later put to use when he, then desperate and paranoid, attempted to eliminate all enemies of the French Revolution by employing the so-called National Razor--- the guillotine. One of Robespierre's schoolmates, Fréron, also made

unflattering comments about Robespierre's demeanor and personality. In his words, Robespierre was "...melancholy, morose, and liverish, jealous of his comrades' successes... silent, reserved, unbending, secretive... I can't remember ever seeing him smile. If anyone offended him he never forgot it."³⁸ Obviously, the descriptions provided by Charlotte and those who knew Robespierre at school recalling Robespierre's character throughout his college years are extraordinarily contradictory.

At the College of Louis-le-Grand, Robespierre was introduced to two of the greatest influences on his later thinking and personal philosophy: the classics, particularly of Roman jurisprudence, and the work of the Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³⁹ One of Robespierre's fellow students who later became active in the revolutionary struggle, Camille Desmoulins, implied the effect of classical works on the worldview of his peers could not be overemphasized.⁴⁰ By reading the classics, such as Cicero, the students of Louis-le-Grand were instructed to cherish freedom, not to kneel before tyrants.⁴¹ In Desmoulins's words, "It was foolish to imagine that we would be inspired by the fathers of the fatherland of the Capital, without feeling horror at the man eaters of Versailles, and that we would admire the past without condemning the present."⁴² The classical notion of virtue gave Robespierre the notion that government's sole purpose was to take care of the welfare of the nation.⁴³ It is easy to see the effect the works of Cicero had on Robespierre's speeches--- both men were adept at verbal condemnation.⁴⁴ It is thought, however, the man who had the largest influence on Robespierre's personal philosophy at this time was the aforementioned Rousseau.⁴⁵

Robespierre, quite simply, adored Rousseau, saying it was Rousseau who showed him how to attain self-knowledge.⁴⁶ Rousseau's impact wasn't purely ideological; his work also imparted the Social Contract theory of government to Robespierre.⁴⁷ This theory suggests humankind is naturally good, but becomes tarnished due to unethical rule and governance.⁴⁸ The concept of the "general will" is significant to this theory.⁴⁹ The general will did not necessarily rest with the majority of the French

people--- it could lie with a select group of particularly enlightened individuals. (In the mind of Robespierre, he was one of these individuals, solely and impartially concerned with the good of the state.)⁵⁰

The general will is what ought to be put into law, not the random whim of a single authoritarian ruler.⁵¹ However, Rousseau doesn't believe one ought to put the feelings of the individual above the needs of the state. If a particularly troublesome individual frequently flouts the law---the general will---Rousseau feels that unruly person ought to be condemned to death.⁵² Obviously, this statement takes on ominous overtones when viewed in the light of a slightly obsessive, perhaps lonely, idealistic Robespierre eagerly absorbing this dynamic new idea for the first time. From Rousseau, Robespierre attained high moral standards, not just for himself, but for his nation.⁵³ He believed nationalistic ardor would lead to unsullied personal morality, and vice versa.⁵⁴

Despite the impact of these radical new ideas, Robespierre's educational environment was quite conservative.⁵⁵ Scheduling predominated--- even wasting an unnecessary moment by not taking the most direct route to a classroom was regarded with suspicion and irritation by teachers.⁵⁶ Intimacy and friendship between students was regarded with suspicion as a waste of valuable time.⁵⁷ The school took its religious policies very seriously, enforcing mandatory church attendance until the senior year of college.⁵⁸ Initially, Robespierre was at least an externally practicing and devout Catholic, but his religious belief weakened while he was at college.⁵⁹ After Robespierre was no longer obligated to attend church, he ceased doing so.⁶⁰ However, this loss of interest in conventional religion does not mean Robespierre lost his faith in God. On the contrary, Robespierre still possessed a belief in a Supreme Being, and this faith reinforced his very strict, rigorous moral code.⁶¹ This spiritual belief was later, of course, reflecting in the Cult of the Supreme Being, an extremely miscalculated religious measure Robespierre took much later in the course of the French Revolution.⁶²

In 1780, while Maximilien was still at school, his sister, Henriette, then nineteen, died.⁶³ This tragedy, the premature loss of yet another member of his family, had a profound impact on Robespierre's frame of mind; according to his sister Charlotte, "This fatal destiny influenced Maximilien's character more than is thought; it rendered him sad and melancholy."⁶⁴ It is possible this additional loss stiffened Robespierre's ambition and resolve, encouraging him to throw himself into his work with added passion and fervor, for on July 19, 1781, Robespierre graduated and left college with a great deal of honor.⁶⁵ The Principal of the College of Louis-le-Grand lauded Robespierre's exceptional abilities, his respectable behavior throughout his twelve years at the school, and his high scores in his philosophy and law exams, mentioning the many prizes Robespierre had won for his academic achievements.⁶⁶ Robespierre was granted a monetary prize of six hundred *livres*, which was one of the highest monetary sums ever given to a student at Louis-le-Grand upon graduation, and Robespierre's scholarship was, upon his request, given to his younger brother Augustin.⁶⁷

Robespierre now commenced his professional law career.⁶⁸ It is unknown by historians where Robespierre undertook his practical study of the law as there are conflicting accounts.⁶⁹ One such account, written by Montjoie, states that Robespierre was told by a professional lawyer he had no aptitude for law and ought to go back home to Arras because there at least he had some precedence and background, since his father and grandfather had been relatively successful lawyers.⁷⁰ However, it seems probable this account is biased and false.⁷¹

Robespierre was undoubtedly ambitious. In his own words, "I bring at the very least a highly competitive spirit and an extremely strong desire to succeed."⁷² Sadly, his return to Arras as a talented, intellectual success was marred by an unpleasant familial squabble.⁷³ After Henriette's death, Monsieur Durut, the relatively new husband of one of Robespierre's aunts, forced the residuary legatee for Henriette's will, Augustin Carrault, to pay him eight hundred *livres* Robespierre's father had owed him.

Robespierre was disgusted and offended by this crude greediness in the face of his sister's death, and endeavored to cut off all contact between himself and his family.⁷⁴ Thus, his ambition was also spurred on by the struggle for financial independence. He shared a home with his sister, Charlotte, and made a heroic effort to make ends meet.⁷⁵ His graduation prize from Louis-le-Grand, money left him by his grandparents, and his meager earnings from his new, frail law practice were not sufficient to support him and Charlotte.⁷⁶ In the fall of 1782, his pride was dented when his dire financial straits compelled him to accept an offer of lodgings from the loathed Monsieur Durut.⁷⁷

However, even when struggling to make ends meet, Robespierre was a quite successful lawyer.⁷⁸ According to Charlotte, "He had a very peculiar predilection for the lawyer's profession; I often heard him say that there was not more sublime profession in the world, when it was exercised with disinterestedness and humanity."⁷⁹ On November 8, 1781, Robespierre was admitted to the Council of Artois, and was given the privilege of practicing law in Artesian courts.⁸⁰ Surprisingly, his sad and rather scandalous childhood served him well; those who recalled the vagaries of his father applauded the efforts of his bright, talented, driven son to restore the good name of the de Robespierres.⁸¹ Thus, the Bishop of Artois gave Robespierre the position of magistrate in the Episcopal Court very quickly, on March 9, 1782.⁸² Here, Robespierre's aptitude for the law strengthened and impressed many.⁸³ Although he evidently lacked applied experience and was insecure in his abilities as a speaker, he quickly established himself as a reasonably successful lawyer.⁸⁴ In his capacity as a magistrate, he was fair and evenhanded in his treatment of criminals, according to Charlotte.⁸⁵ Interestingly, this job was what caused Robespierre to first have to confront the horror of the death penalty. When asked to condemn an assassin who clearly was guilty to death, Robespierre became so distraught he returned home, and didn't eat for two days while attempting to deal with this moral dilemma. He told Charlotte he was convinced of the man's guilt, but he couldn't face the idea of being responsible for putting a man to death. According to Charlotte, this ethical struggle was so painful, he resigned his functions as a judge,

unable to reconcile the act of putting a man to death with his own moral code.⁸⁶ This isn't quite accurate; he didn't resign as a judge and he did sign the death sentence.⁸⁷ A colleague on the Episcopal Court, however, also recollected Robespierre's uncertainty and pain at being responsible for man's death, so at least that part of the story is verifiable.⁸⁸

Robespierre's early career entailed thirteen cases in 1782, his first full year of legal service.⁸⁹ He won seven of these cases, and lost two--- the others were settled out of court.⁹⁰ In 1784, he pled another thirteen cases, winning ten and only losing one.⁹¹ Charlotte attributes this success to her brother's habit of selecting his cases very carefully, only taking ones he was sure were just.⁹² Also, he was a very logical speaker, and was good at selecting and presenting convincing evidence.⁹³ Robespierre was recognized as an extremely gifted lawyer, but there are several reasons he didn't have very many cases.⁹⁴ Robespierre explained his lack of cases by saying the well-established, older lawyers hogged all the cases, since they always were given first pick.⁹⁵ Robespierre also had very few surviving relations as contacts; thus, he was, unlike many of his peers, forced to attempt to establish a legal practice without the help of a supportive father or grandfather capable of pulling strings to ensure his success.⁹⁶

Robespierre became known as a lawyer who was willing to defend the poor, sometimes even paying the costs of the case himself instead of requiring an impoverished client to pay.⁹⁷ Charlotte melodramatically describes her brother as "*the support of the oppressed and the defender of innocence.*"⁹⁸ However, not all his clients were impoverished, agrarian countrymen. In his most famous case, he defended Charles Dominique Vissery de-Bois Valé, whose crime was putting up a lightning rod, which his neighbors felt endangered their wellbeing.⁹⁹ In court, Robespierre passionately spoke of the ignorant oppression of previous scientific minds, mentioning Galileo as a prime example.¹⁰⁰ He provided an enlightening, comprehensive history of the development of the lightning rod and presented a great deal of evidence showing the lightning rod as a useful, safe, ingenious device.¹⁰¹ He concluded the case

by fervently stating the responsibility of the court to defend science and prove their zest for scientific advancement.¹⁰² Robespierre won the case, and sent Benjamin Franklin, the developer of the lightning rod, a letter containing his arguments in favor of the lightning rod.¹⁰³

Charlotte Robespierre left a very detailed account of her brother's life at this time. She said he was frequently holed up in his study, away from the rest of his family. He was oftentimes very preoccupied with work; once, when Robespierre was wrapped up in thought, he spooned soup onto the tablecloth without realizing Charlotte hadn't put a bowl at his place yet. When his family engaged in pleasurable, lighthearted activities such as playing cards, Robespierre rarely joined in. Instead, he'd wander to a corner of the room and continue his contemplations as though no one else were present. Charlotte says he was still a cheerful person, capable of being amiable company. In fact, she says, he would sometimes laugh so hard he cried.¹⁰⁴

When Robespierre wasn't solely focused on work, which was apparently rare, he concentrated on other intellectual pursuits.¹⁰⁵ According to Legay, a fellow intellectual who knew Robespierre well, he was a respected man of letters, as well as a well-respected lawyer.¹⁰⁶ His passion for writing was spurred on by The Society of Arts and Sciences of Metz, which sometimes held essay-writing competitions.¹⁰⁷ Robespierre's surviving essay, dealing with the assigned topic of why the family of a criminal also faced stigma due to the criminal's actions and whether this stigma was detrimental to society or useful, won second place.¹⁰⁸ He argued the family of a criminal could wipe out the actions of the criminal by heroic actions of their own, but that the stigma itself was more harmful than useful.¹⁰⁹ (The social dishonor Robespierre occasionally faced due to the irresponsibility of his father enhanced this opinion.¹¹⁰ Interestingly, Robespierre stated in this essay that the most powerful force against the development of vice is appropriate paternal authority.¹¹¹) In the essay, there is a quote which clearly illustrates the development of beliefs which would later play an important role in Robespierre's course of action

throughout the violent and obsessive Reign of Terror. Robespierre stated “Every citizen has a share in the sovereign power... and therefore cannot acquit his dearest friend, if the safety of the state requires his punishment. A man of high principle will be ready to sacrifice to the State his wealth, his life, his very self---everything, indeed, except his honor.”¹¹² We can see foreshadowing of Robespierre’s willingness to condemn suspected enemies of the state to death in this high-minded, idealistic essay. This strong ethical code was later tainted by paranoia and twisted into the ugly fanaticism responsible for the deaths of thousands during the Reign of Terror.

On November 15, 1783, Robespierre joined the Royal Academy of Arras, the cultural center of his hometown, and was elected director of the Academy in February of 1786.¹¹³ The director of the Academy traditionally made a speech upon his election, generally a fairly platitudinous, unoriginal spiel regarding the significance of intellectualism and ethical behavior.¹¹⁴ Instead of following this path, Robespierre decided to speak on the legal treatment of illegitimate children.¹¹⁵ On April 27, 1786, he delivered this speech, which was an hour and forty-five minutes long.¹¹⁶ Everyone in his audience was very much aware of his family history and knew that his parents had been married only shortly prior to his birth.¹¹⁷ However, Robespierre never referred to himself during his speech, instead speaking with the clear courage of his convictions on the rights of illegitimate children.¹¹⁸ Despite the risky and controversial subject matter, the speech was an enormous success.¹¹⁹

In 1787, Robespierre was accepted into the Rosati, an intellectual and cultural society in Arras, in which philosophical ideas were discussed and flowery poetry was recited.¹²⁰ A speech given at his acceptance ceremony detailed the enormity of Robespierre’s achievements, and provides yet another perspective on Robespierre’s personality. The speaker, Legay, noted that all intellectuals of Arras had been observing Robespierre’s brilliant career at the bar. In his own words, “We admire high talents, especially when, like yours, Sir, they are always devoted to a useful end; and we have followed with the

highest interest the stages of their development."¹²¹ Legay's description of Robespierre's character contrasts sharply with those harsher depictions of Robespierre's personality given by his schoolmates. Legay describes Robespierre as a talented, humorous conversationalist who loves laughter and joy.¹²² Whether Robespierre developed this capacity after graduating from school, or whether he always possessed it, is uncertain.

In his young adult years, the only part of Robespierre's life where he wasn't achieving great success was his love life. Robespierre wasn't particularly attractive---he was very small (approximately five feet, three inches), and his face was faintly pock-marked.¹²³ He was thin and required extremely strong glasses due to his poor vision.¹²⁴ Robespierre also had an uncontrollable facial twitch, usually just affecting his eyes, but, at times of great stress, his mouth as well.¹²⁵ His physical appearance might have impaired his love life, but it is more likely his habits, such as sending lengthy transcripts of speeches or articles he wrote to ladies of his acquaintance, deterred women from taking him seriously.¹²⁶ The most serious of his flirtations was with a Mademoiselle Deshorties, his cousin by marriage.¹²⁷ Prior to leaving for the Estates General, he had spoken to her of marriage, and, according to Charlotte, they had come to an unofficial understanding.¹²⁸ However, Mademoiselle Deshorties married another man while Robespierre was away, without informing him of her decision.¹²⁹ This turn of events devastated Robespierre.¹³⁰

It is clear by 1787 Robespierre's careers, both literary and law, were on the rise.¹³¹ He had become a relatively successful lawyer and had been recognized as a leading mind among the Artesian intellectuals.¹³² Thus, when the Estates General were summoned in August of 1788, it was fairly definite Robespierre was a leading candidate for the Third Estate.¹³³ Many people in Robespierre's hometown expected him to run, and most hoped he would.¹³⁴ But Robespierre had already made some enemies. He was extremely outspoken with his opinions, and had been pegged as radical and democratic.¹³⁵ Thus

he was unpopular among monarchists and conservatives.¹³⁶ Despite this opposition, Robespierre was elected a member of the Artesian Third Estate on April 24, 1799.¹³⁷ His enemies chalked up his success to intrigue.¹³⁸ Robespierre was very pleased by his election--- while he had still been pursuing a legal career, he had been irritated by only being able to argue a few cases each year, and thus was glad to have another venue for his ambition and energy.¹³⁹ According to Charlotte, Mirabeau, a well-regarded and famous deputy of the Third Estate, commented that all attempts to bribe Robespierre onto a particular side of an issue or in any way to corrupt Robespierre were futile--- Robespierre was not greedy, and he was levelheaded and moral.¹⁴⁰ This ethical mindset and unswerving devotion to his principles led his colleagues in the Third Estate to label Robespierre “the Incorruptible,” a title which later took on a horrible irony in the Reign of Terror.¹⁴¹

Robespierre and the other members of the Artesian Third Estate left Arras for Paris late, perhaps due to difficulties arranging for lodgings in Paris.¹⁴² As the delegation prepared to leave Arras, Robespierre famously commented “Everything in France is going to change now.”¹⁴³ Due to the Artesian Third Estate’s late departure, they most likely missed the official reception of the Estates-General on May 2, 1782.¹⁴⁴ On May 6, all the deputies of the Third Estate met in the Salle des Menus Plaisirs.¹⁴⁵ At this meeting, very little of importance was discussed.¹⁴⁶ Since there was so little precedent (the last convening of the Estates-General had occurred in 1614), much of the proceedings were devoted to what the proper official procedure for meetings ought to be.¹⁴⁷ It was agreed the example of the English Parliament was ridiculous when applied to French politics, but no one seemed to be able to conclusively state what the proper course of French politics ought to be.¹⁴⁸ These periodic, frustrating, non-productive meetings lasted for two days after the initial convening.¹⁴⁹ The room they were meeting in was massive, to accommodate the hundreds of spectators desperate to take a look at the historic proceedings.¹⁵⁰ The size of the room (not to mention the noisy observers) made it well-nigh impossible to hear the speeches given by delegates, which also made the meetings exasperating and inefficient.¹⁵¹

Soon after Robespierre's arrival, he joined the Breton Club, a gathering of all the most passionate, radical, provincial delegates.¹⁵² It is probable his activity in this group soothed his frustrations with the slow pace of the Third Estate.

The early deliberations of the Third Estate, after sorting out procedural difficulties, were to do with what to do about the other two (more privileged) Estates.¹⁵³ On May 16, Robespierre suggested the Third Estate ought to invite the First Estate, the clergy, to join them. If the First Estate agreed, the First and Third Estates could present an intimidating unified front to the uncooperative Second Estate, the nobility.¹⁵⁴ This suggestion, the first time Robespierre spoke in the Estates, was thought a good one by many, including Mirabeau, but action wasn't taken.¹⁵⁵

Unfortunately, our records of Robespierre's early career in the Third Estate are unclear and muddled.¹⁵⁶ The press weren't provided with a speaker's notes, and the size of the room and the loudness of spectators made it extremely difficult for journalists to accurately report what was said at meetings.¹⁵⁷ Historians now know Robespierre's first major speech, on June 6, was an extemporaneous attack on clerical privilege, in which he passionately declared that spoiled, pampered clerics and bishops ought to give their money and luxuries, which were an affront to the religion they practiced, to the poor.¹⁵⁸ His passionate condemnation of the clergy attracted a good deal of attention.¹⁵⁹ Instead of applause after his conclusion, there was a startled murmuring among the deputies, who mostly had no idea who the fiery speaker was.¹⁶⁰ One deputy, Reybaz, evidently commented, "This man is not yet experienced, he is too verbose, and does not know when to stop; but he has a fund of eloquence and originality which will not be lost in the crowd."¹⁶¹

The press's coverage of this speech was mostly inaccurate. Oftentimes, journalists attributed the speech to other deputies, or, even if they did realize Robespierre was the speaker, spelled his name wrong, resulting in the speech being attributed to "Robess-pierre," "Robesse-pierre," "Robests-piesse,"

or even Robert Pierre.¹⁶² This irritating problem of speeches being attributed to the wrong delegate later resulted in delegates printing their own speeches themselves.¹⁶³

Robespierre's effective public speaking did not come naturally to him.¹⁶⁴ He once told a friend that he had been extremely shy and introverted as a child (as Charlotte and his fellow students' accounts attest), and apparently he had never fully outgrown this shyness.¹⁶⁵ Robespierre said to this friend that he "always shook with fear on approaching the tribune," and he was so terrified by speaking in public he often was entirely unaware of his surroundings when he was speaking, because he was so focused on his fear.¹⁶⁶ Apparently, his panic upon standing up to speak unrehearsed when discussing clerical privilege was such he resolved to never again speak without notes.¹⁶⁷ Despite this anxiety associated with speechmaking, Robespierre became the head of the Artesian deputies, due to his intuitiveness (he was adept at determining various delegates' motives and trustworthiness), his gift for effective political strategy, and his persuasive, effective speeches.¹⁶⁸ Parisians who witnessed this young man in action sent many letters to his hometown of Arras, lauding his oratorical ability, his high-minded moral code, and his determination to abide by that code.¹⁶⁹

Obviously, Robespierre had taken a leading position among the Third Estate, and his revolutionary rhetoric undoubtedly served to whip up the delegates' nationalistic, anti-monarchy fervor. However, it is unknown exactly what part Robespierre played in the historic Tennis Court Oath, which promised that the National Assembly, the new name for the Third Estate, would not dissolve until they had drafted a constitution.¹⁷⁰ Robespierre was the forty-fifth person to sign the famous document, but whether he was involved in the drafting of the document itself is unknown.¹⁷¹ When the king, after pretending to submit to the demands of the National Assembly, ordered the royal army to converge upon Paris, Robespierre was one of the delegates given the task of addressing the king on July 9 to state the National Assembly's disquiet over the king's action.¹⁷² After the Tennis Court Oath and the

destruction of the Bastille, Robespierre wrote, "The present Revolution has produced in a few days greater events than the whole previous history of mankind."¹⁷³

Robespierre was one of the deputies who accompanied the king in his journey from Versailles to Paris on July 17.¹⁷⁴ This procession had an enormous impact on him, greatly impassioning his revolutionary ardor.¹⁷⁵ While in Paris, he, along with the other present delegates, visited the site of the destroyed Bastille, accompanied by an enthusiastically patriotic crowd.¹⁷⁶ Robespierre also found this experience very moving, writing "I could scarcely tear myself away from this spot, the sight of which brings such feelings of pleasure and such notions of liberty to all good citizens."¹⁷⁷ However, ominously, at the end of this letter containing such zealously principled and idealistic revelations, he inserted a casual postscript: "M. Foullon was hung yesterday, by decree of the people."¹⁷⁸ We can already clearly see how his nationalistic passion was warping his sensitivity, making even acts he previously found incomprehensible and barbarous understandable and just. Robespierre's principled mind eventually turned to extremism and unswerving radicalism. At this moment, historians can see the beginning of the tragic transition from an ethical, uncompromising, sensitive lawyer, to a paranoid, obsessive neurotic who later was responsible for the deaths of thousands.¹⁷⁹

Unfortunately, Robespierre's idealism turned to obsession. His single-minded focus, responsible for his exceptional college career, was put to eradicating enemies of the state. The young man who was so upset by being responsible for the death of one man became responsible for the deaths of thousands. His tragic family history--- the death of his mother, his father's abandonment, and the premature death of his sister--- exacerbated his introverted nature. He was capable of isolating himself from outside perspectives, leaving him alone in his mind with Rousseau, Cicero, and other philosophers who had such an impact on his early thought. However, he took the thoughts of these philosophers too far, as he careened out of control in 1793 and 1794, the last years of his life. Many of his positive characteristics---

his devotedness to his cause, his love of his country, his gift for public speaking and political strategy, the brightness of youthful convictions--- led to his downfall. Robespierre, the man responsible for the tragedy of the Reign of Terror, was, himself, a tragedy.

Endnotes:

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- 3: Ibid., p. 43
- 4: Ibid., p. 2
- 5: J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre, Volume I: From the Birth of Robespierre to the Death of Louis XVI* (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1968), p. 2
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- 9: George Rudé, ed. *Robespierre: Great Lives Observed* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1967), p. 3
- 10: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 4
- 11: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 3
- 12: Ibid., p. 3-4
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- 14: Charlotte Robespierre, "Chapter One," *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre Sur Ses Deux Frères*, ed. Albert Laponneraye, trans. "Estelle La Chatte," (original: 1835, translation: 2006), accessed 4/29/2013, <http://revolution-fr.livejournal.com/tag/robespierre%20charlotte> and Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 4
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- 27: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 5
- 28: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 12
- 29: Ibid., p. 12
- 30: Ibid., p. 26
- 31: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 8
- 32: Ibid., p. 8
- 33: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 22
- 34: Scott McLetchie, "Maximilien Robespierre, Master of the Terror," accessed 4/29/2013, <http://www.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1983-4/mcletchie.htm>
- 35: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 15
- 36: Ibid., p. 16
- 37: Ibid., p. 16
- 38: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 9-10
- 39: McLetchie, "Maximilien Robespierre," <http://www.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1983-4/mcletchie.htm>
- 40: Ibid.
- 41: Ibid.
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- 44: Ibid.
- 45: Ibid.
- 46: Ibid.
- 47: Ibid.
- 48: Ibid.

- 49: Ibid.
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- 51: Ibid.
- 52: Ibid.
- 53: Ibid.
- 54: Ibid.
- 55: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 18-20
- 56: Ibid., p. 19
- 57: Ibid., p. 19-20
- 58: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 12
- 59: Ibid., p. 11-12
- 60: Ibid., p. 12
- 61: Ibid., p. 12
- 62: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 196, 199
- 63: Ibid., p. 21
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- 68: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 27
- 69: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 14
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- 73: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 17-18
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- 122: Ibid., p. 28
- 123: McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 48
- 124: Ibid., p. 48-49
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144: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 46

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- 168: Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 50
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